

SLD12.02.07 First Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 43:1-2, 4-10a
JILL OGLESBY EVANS

“Renew, Rebuild, Rebirth—A Mission Week in NOLA”

As I've said – today is the First Sunday of Advent - in church-speak the first Sunday of the new liturgical year. Last Sunday, when Deedra preached about Christ the King, was the end of the liturgical cycle of the previous liturgical year. Now we're starting all over at the beginning again – with anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ, as well as of the Kingdom he brought with him.

This is why the first Sunday of Advent traditionally focuses on the Kingdom of God – what it is, where it is, when it's coming, how we're supposed to look for it, how we're meant to behave while we hang around waiting for it. Because the arrival of God as Jesus the baby was a new revelation of God's Kingdom, as was Jesus' ministry on earth.

But it's a tricky thing to talk about, the Kingdom – even for Jesus, who was forever resorting to metaphors, parables, and everyday similes to give his disciples some hint about what the Kingdom is - a treasure, a pearl, yeast, a mustard seed.

Mostly the disciples just scratched their heads. The Kingdom is present among us, said Jesus, but still to come. At work in our midst, but far greater than our existence. Inevitable but elusive.

Eventually the disciples got used to such double-speak. Name the Kingdom and it's already something else; that much they figured out. Expect it, and you'll be disappointed. Demand it, and phhh, good luck; apparently God's Kingdom is categorically unmanageable.

Still, every once in a while, mostly when they were hanging around Jesus, the disciples would catch a glimpse of God's Kingdom, more with the eyes of their hearts than the eyes of their heads – like when they were partying in Cana, or when that crooked old woman stood up straight, or when Lazarus strolled out of his tomb.

Once in a while the Kingdom of God did seem to sneak into the disciples' lives, often when they least expected it. And when it did, they invariably recognized it. And when they recognized it, they wanted more of it. A whole lot more. Because, you see, it was so unspeakably precious. So deeply and richly and completely satisfying. So...right. So...ripe. So perfectly whole and complete in itself that the disciples themselves became perfectly whole and complete in its presence, even if only for the moment.

Well, those of us who went down to New Orleans last week on the mission trip, I guess we could say that maybe the Kingdom sneaked into our lives just a touch. Maybe not how we, or you, might have expected it to appear. But enough that we're willing to try to talk about it some this morning.

Our words will not suffice – we already know that. Still, on this first Sunday of the celebration of Christ's coming Kingdom, the seven of us who ventured down to New Orleans would like to make a stab, at least, at communicating what we experienced, what we saw; what we grasped, and what grasped us.

Try to listen for what's behind the words we use, for what's flowing through them, or maybe where they're pointing. It can be hard sometimes to recognize the Kingdom even when you're in the middle of it. All most of us could say for sure was that it was important for us to be there in New Orleans, together, doing what we were doing, during

that particular week. Maybe we did some good there. But mostly, I think, some good was done for us.

In your bulletins, there's a responsive reading from Isaiah after each person who shares. After each person is done, we'll join together in that reading.

Debbie

I'd never been to New Orleans before. I was amazed at how precious the city is. The French Quarter is an architectural treasure. But the real treasure is the spirit of the people.

New Orleans is a city of pioneers raising their cabins on the frontier. I'll let someone else tell you about Joan. I identified with a neighbor who has two kids in college, a boy and a girl like mine. His family is doing all right, but he and his wife can't move back home yet from Mobile because their insurance settlement won't stretch far enough to let him to finish their kitchen. Consider the busyness of your life now, earning a living and caring for children or elderly parents, and then imagine what it would be like to add battles with insurance and the challenges of completely gutting and rebuilding your home from a long distance. Well, two years after Katrina, we didn't see many finished houses, but we saw a whole city of people who are in this together. Through faith, they are finding the strength to cope. And they are grateful for outside help.

As well as the locals, the other volunteers were an inspiration. It was a treat to spend the week with generous people who are all happy to be doing what they are doing. We got a one-week taste of living a simple and meaningful life in a Kingdom community, and we didn't want to come home.

If you can possibly go, you should. You should go because the need is immense and ongoing, but also because you will have a wonderful time.

Thus says the Lord

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

For I am the Lord your God.

Karen

I think the main thing that I want to say about our trip to New Orleans is something that we heard more than once while we were down there. Even though two years have passed since Katrina hit the coast, there is a tremendous need for help. As time has passed and publicity has dwindled, the number of volunteers is beginning to wane as well, and there are still thousands of people who need help. Much of the actual help that has come to the area has been through volunteer efforts and the need is still very great.

The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Camp where we stayed just opened in October, so you can see that PDA has committed to continuing the construction work that is going on daily.

My experience on this trip was different from our trip to Gulfport in some ways, due to the different accommodations, the smaller number of volunteers at the camp and the fact that it was, after all, New Orleans.

But some things remained the same: We worked hard, learned how to do things we'd never done, met people with remarkable spirit and faith, prayed together, laughed till it hurt, and came back with the intention to go back the next chance we get. It may be that there is a person somewhere who has participated in this program who has not come away with a sense of being blessed, but I have not met that person yet.

We met and became friends with a group of folks from First Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina and while our days were spent apart, working in different homes, our evenings were spent together, finding common ground. We shared camp and kitchen chores, learned about each other's lives and had one of the best Thanksgivings I've ever had.

I don't think I mentioned this when we came back from Gulfport, but I'll say it now: The needs are great and the opportunities are constant. The PDA folks have made it easy for us to join their effort. All we have to do is be willing and show up. Any of us can start the ball rolling for the next trip. All are welcome, and the blessings are too many to count.

Thus says the Lord, "I am the Lord
and besides me there is no savior.
**When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you,
for I am the Lord your God."**

Kay

There are few things I can truly say have changed my life: the first two are the births of my children and the most recent is the week we just spent in New Orleans at the Olive Tree, working with Project Homecoming and the Presbyterian Disaster Association.

I have never been on a mission before and the trip was one of such beauty and grace that I came home planning to do another trip especially to New Orleans. The week was full of joy, laughter, tears and prayers. Each person I met seemed to be there just for me: the CPA from Florida who signed on as a volunteer for seven weeks, Jill's sister and brother-in-law, Karen, Debora, people I have met only briefly before and Jill who I knew purely from having officiated at my father's funeral. And Sally, who encouraged me to sign on originally.

I spent the week painting trim in bathrooms, a solitary task which was just what I needed to quiet my soul and restore me to a true thanksgiving. When I returned home I

realized more than ever before just how much I have to be thankful for. God was within our midst. I felt his presence despite the horror of what happened to the people of New Orleans. I needed this trip as a quiet interlude to a frustratingly busy life to remember just what life is about. I found a peacefulness even among the debris and dirt, the dust and the smell of New Orleans. Thank you for letting me be a part of your pilgrimage.

Thus says the Lord
"Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
**I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
For I am the Lord your God."**

Sally

For several months, I have been thinking about having a different kind of holiday season this year. Doing something different. When Jill announced that she was planning a trip to New Orleans to help Katrina survivors, I knew that would be the perfect Thanksgiving for me this year! It actually accomplished 2 things that I have wanted to do. In addition to the different Thanksgiving, I could also go help the people of the Gulf Coast which I have wanted to do for 3 years.

As with other Mission Trips I have been on, I was filled with anticipation and excitement. What a fun group we turned out to be, and never a dull moment. Working hard, always laughing (well almost always), and quite creative in the kitchen that offered a microwave, a grill and single burner. What a Thanksgiving dinner feast we were able to prepare!! How much fun we had playing Cranium (making up our own rules as we went along) and just visiting with our new friends. In all there were 18 of us. 7 of us, 6 from Durham NC, 2 volunteer staff and 1 paid staff and her mother.

In addition to preparing our own fine Thanksgiving feast we explored the areas fine cuisine. We actually did a lot in a very short period of time. A quick trip to the French Quarter for gumbo, red beans and rice, and beignets, finding the best shrimp and oyster po-boys in New Orleans.

A quick tour of the area was quite sobering and brought home how much we have to be thankful for and how much people are still needed there. In the 9th Ward, slab after slab after slab of concrete where houses had been. Messages painted on the few houses that were left-"Good Bye O Friend" "Do not Destroy, We will Rebuild", Houses that still had water lines on them, the markings left by rescue groups, whole shopping centers standing empty. In the area that we were working, the second hardest hit area, it seemed that 3 of every 4 houses is still vacant and in need of repair.

There is so much to share, so many thoughts, emotions, experiences, way too much for a 15 minute sermon. The most important thing I think is the need is still great and will be for years to come. The people who are being helped are SO GRATEFUL. There are some wonderful people who are giving of their time to provide leadership and directions to groups like ours. As with other Mission Trips that I have been on, I feel that I got much more than I gave. It was a totally rewarding experience, from the feeling

of being able to help to the new friendships forged to deepening of existing friendships. I came home very tired but it was a good tired. I am looking forward to going again.

Thus says the Lord:

“Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.

**I will say to the north, ‘Give them up,’
and to the south, “Do not withhold.**

For I am the Lord your God.”

Lisa

It’s odd really. I don’t know truly how to describe it. It was wonderful and it was fun. It was more than I expected – a great experience. It did not get me down seeing all the destruction. I almost felt there was a part of me missing since I didn’t feel the pain and sadness like the others expressed, as I thought I should. Instead, I saw a community trying to come alive again. Despite horrendous devastation, amazingly corrupt politics and a government that has turned its back, the city is trying to rebuild itself. That’s hope. That’s the remarkable human spirit. That’s the spirit of God.

I have to admit that when I originally saw the house that I was to work on, I was put off. It was a nice house in a nice neighborhood. Why was I being asked to volunteer my time to rebuild for someone who clearly was not poor? I was not pleased.

But, the week taught me how short sighted I was. I learned that we need to help all people, not just the truly down trodden. Yes, the poor need extra care but, in New Orleans, there were thousands upon thousands of people who worked hard all their lives and did fairly well – enough to raise a family and to have a nice home, who saw it all washed away. They need help too. Our family was one of these. It’s a lesson to carry with me. How often have I overlooked an opportunity to help just because the person didn’t look like my pre-conceived notion of “in need?” During the week, I tiled with my husband, my sister, Jill, and Sally. We argued, cursed, laughed, moaned, struggled and got that kitchen floor tiled. I’m bruised, battered, and feeling great. I learned so much. My husband and I are looking forward to going back.

Thus says the Lord

“Do not fear, for I am with you,
with everyone whom I have formed.

**Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!**

**Let all the nations gather together
and let the peoples assemble.**

For I am the Lord your God.”

Jeff

Thank you for suggesting New Orleans for Thanksgiving. I tried to come down a little over a year ago, but I did not receive a reply from either Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity. I was absolutely surprised to see freeway intersections [N.O. East] still without proper lighting. The intersection [Read & Chef Menteur] still had barricades and we drove by twice. Unreal!

The people [Volunteers & paid help] are a very caring and wonderful group of people. The Olive Branch was a good place to stay for both proximity to the jobs and the “comforts” of home.

Meeting the people that we were helping was my highlight of the trip. Rudolph comes to mind. He could hardly contain his emotions. He was HOME AGAIN!!! The tours of the neighborhoods were a real eyeopener for me. Houses, neighborhoods and businesses were completely wiped out. But Charles shared some photos that showed all the silt & sand that was left after the waters receded. Man! That was a lot of work just to clear that & the debris out. So this illustrates all the work completed up until now and all the more work needed to bring N.O. back to status quo.

I hope to be able to help again in the future.

Thus says the Lord

“Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,
and let them hear and say, ‘It is true.’

**You are my witnesses, my servants whom I have chosen
so that you may know and believe me.**

For I am the Lord your God.”

Jill

You know, working in a church can tie a body up in knots. There’s the business of the church, and the program of the church, and the committees of the church, and the facility of the church, and the staff of the church, and the leaders of the church, and the members of the church, and the visitors of the church, and the *neighbors* of the church, and the Presbytery of the church – all the different stakeholders, if you will, in the whole holy enterprise of Christ’s body functioning on earth. Then there are the crises and the tragedies and the sickness and the deaths and the marriages and the troubled marriages and the divorces and the babies and the confirmation and the interpersonal dynamics and drama and disappointments – all falling somehow under the rubric of the gospel, though sometimes it can be easy in the midst of all that to forget exactly how.

And then, every once in a while, there’s a mission trip.

Now I have to admit that something about the phrase “mission trip” sounds fundamentally dreary, conjuring images of earnest evangelism, navy blue bonnets, and sensible shoes. But every time I go on a mission trip with this church, I’m struck yet again by how refreshing it is to my mind, my friendships, my perspective, and my faith. A whole week of zero lip-flapping about the gospel, and just doing it, changes how I feel about the whole kit and caboodle of the work of the church. Not that we can’t make a

stab at “doing” the gospel every minute of every day, in every task and relationship. There’s just some special gift to setting a group intention to step out a little beyond our comfort zone and tackle with good spirit and communal focus whatever happens to be put in front of us.

In the case of last week’s trip to New Orleans, what was put in front of us included a dormitory sleeping arrangement with a bunch of strangers who eventually became friends; outdoor shower tents replete with mosquitoes and the occasional frog; kitchen facilities consisting of a barbecue grill and a microwave, and whatever tools we needed to tackle a variety of finishing construction tasks.

What was also put before us were the limits of our skill, stamina and patience, our capacity to plunge ahead with something we’d never done before, our judgment about whom we were really willing to help, the humor, wisdom and resourcefulness of our group, and the contagious spirit of a entire region of folks determined to pull their lives back together, and grateful not to be forgotten.

It was a bit surreal, really, to witness some of the flash and color of the Delta, especially in the Quarter, juxtaposed with neighborhood after neighborhood after neighborhood of empty houses with spray-painted X’s on their walls showing who first triaged the house, and when, what condition it was in, and how many bodies, if any, had been found.

On the one hand, we ate the best fried oyster and shrimp po-boys we’d ever put in our mouths; on the other, in the neighborhood we worked in, both the hospital and the middle school were still boarded up.

This framed print¹ we got in the Quarter captured for us both the vibrant, brash, colorful spirit of the region, as well as the tragedy of so much of it being simply washed away. For if you look more closely, you’ll see that many of the colorful houses, have been uprooted from their foundation and are being swept away by rushing, roiling waters. But the bright vibrancy of crazy color remains – the spirit of New Orleans has not diminished.



In return for a week dedicated to joining our spirits with the spirit of New Orleans was given us a deep sense of camaraderie, and accomplishment; an honest ache in our bones at the end of a day; the intimacy of brushing teeth together, and of putting up with each other’s snores; the magic of two groups, well, three, if you include PDA staff – becoming one. The joy of a perfectly delightful Thanksgiving where everybody really wanted to be there. (Imagine that. Charles, the Village Manager told this joke: “A kid asks his dad, why are you always supposed to pass the salt and pepper at the same time?” His dad says, “because you don’t want to separate the only couple here that’s happy to be together.”)

Well, we **were** happy to be together that Thanksgiving, and that week, so much so that after we packed up and left, we turned around and went back for another night. And the reason why, so far as I could see, is that it just happened to be one of those unexpected times when the Kingdom sneaked into our lives, and we recognized it, and we wanted more of it. A whole lot more.

¹ “Through the Streets”, by Terrance Osborne
(<http://www.galleryosborne.com/catalog/images/through.jpg>)

I hope we were a blessing to the people whose homes we tended; I know each one of us was blessed. Because, you see, it was so unspeakably precious. So deeply and richly and completely satisfying. So...right. So...ripe. So perfectly whole and complete in itself that we, ourselves, became perfectly whole and complete in its presence, even if only for the moment.

I guess that's what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples, that that's the way it is, the way it's meant to be, every time God's Kingdom comes.

Thus says the Lord
"I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
**I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert
to give drink to the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise."**
For I am the Lord thy God.

To the glory of God. Amen.